Japanese Modern Art & Contemporary Prints

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A & D White
London

fig. 1
Pose (13) Blue Cat

Nishida Tadashige

1942 - Present

This striking woodblock print by contemporary Japanese artist Tadashi Nishida, captures a stylized feline with personality. The deep blue-black cat, detailed with a speckled texture and lighter blue highlights, sits with a curious head tilt and wide, inquisitive white eyes. Set against a flat, vibrant red-orange background, the powerful color contrast creates a modern and whimsical composition that highlights the charming and alert character of its subject.

Foreword

The Japanese woodblock print, or mokuhanga, occupies a unique and revered place in the annals of world art. Its legacy is twofold: on one hand, it is synonymous with the vibrant, ephemeral culture of Edo-period Japan, capturing the "floating world" (ukiyo) of kabuki actors, elegant courtesans, and breathtaking landscapes; on the other, it represents an artistic and philosophical tradition that has continually reinvented itself over centuries. The story of its evolution—from a collaborative commercial craft to a medium for profound personal expression—provides the essential context for understanding the work of its contemporary masters. In the world of modern Japanese woodblock printing, few artists navigate the space between tradition and global modernity with the quiet confidence of Nishida Tadashige (b. 1942). While connoisseurs of the Japanese print are familiar with the masters of the Edo period, Nishida's work represents the evolution of the medium in the 20th and 21st centuries. His art, particularly his beloved depictions of cats and landscapes, exemplifies the visual playfulness and sophistication characteristic of his predecessors, yet it is filtered through a distinctly modern, international lens that is entirely his own.

The technology of woodblock printing arrived in Japan from China around the eighth century, initially serving the religious purpose of reproducing Buddhist texts and imagery. However, it was during the profound societal shifts of the Edo period (1603-1868) that mokuhanga blossomed into a powerful secular art form.

The production of ukiyo-e, or "pictures of the floating world," was a sophisticated commercial enterprise defined by the collaborative hanmoto system, a four-part division of labour. This system began with the publisher (hanmoto), who conceived of the print, commissioned the artist, and managed distribution. The artist (eshi) then produced the initial ink drawing, which was passed to a master carver (horishi) who meticulously carved the design into cherry wood blocks. Finally, a skilled printer (surishi) applied water-based pigments to the blocks and pressed the ink onto dampened handmade paper.

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fig. 2
Cat Relax

Nishida Tadashige
1942 - Present

In this piece, titled "cat (relax)," Tadashi Nishida masterfully captures the dynamic tension between repose and alertness inherent in the feline form. The cat's body is rendered in a deeply saturated, flat black, its limbs sprawled in a posture of ease. Yet, its wide, luminous eyes and perked ears convey a sharp awareness. This minimalist figure is set against a textured, silver-grey ground and framed by an intricate, architectural border, creating a sophisticated dialogue between simple form and decorative pattern.